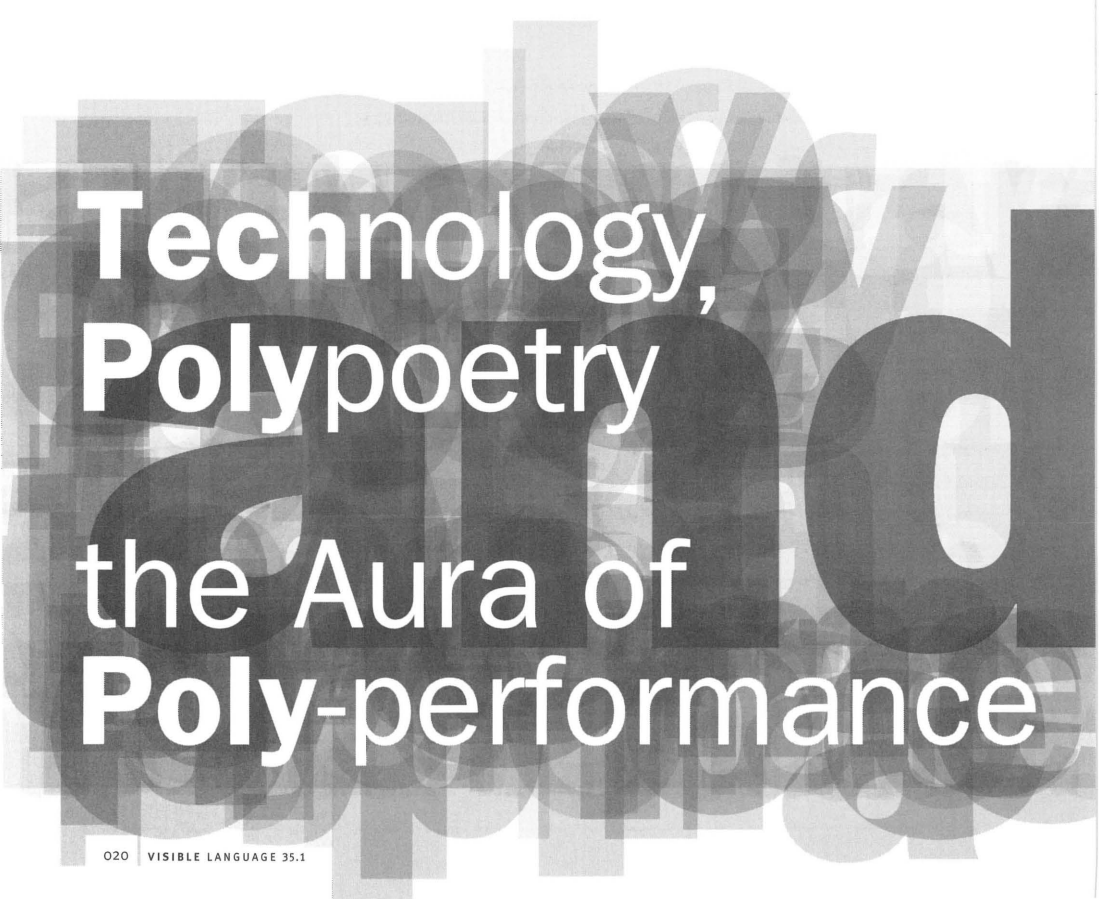


N I C H O L A S Z U R B R U G G

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Visible Language, 35.1
Nicholas Zurbrugg, 20-35
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Using extracts from poets and critics alike, the author lets
demonstrating the pros and cons of aurality in poetic
poetry and performance? A secondary question concerns
investigation. Diverse international artists are presented
critical writings of Walter Benjamin, Jean Baudrillard and



Technology, Polypoetry and the Aura of Poly-performance

them speak directly, through quotation and poetic offering, performance. The central question is: How does technology influence the locus of creativity — is it in the poem itself or the technological? Henri Chopin, Stelarc, Robert Wilson, Orlan and others, while the Paul Virilio provide a counterpoint.

MY CENTRAL ARGUMENT IS that comparative analysis of the almost century-long traditions of media theory and media practice reveals how — across the decades — over-general cultural theory consistently neglects the auratic intensity of new kinds of technological poly-performance.

The following extracts are from the writings and interviews of theorists: the German modernist cultural theorist, Walter Benjamin; the French postmodern theorists, Jean Baudrillard and Paul Virilio; the writings and interviews of poly-artists, such as the Italian futurist Marinetti, the American fluxus artist Dick Higgins; the French and Italian sound poets, Henri Chopin and Enzo Minarelli; and the Australian body artist, Stelarc. They suggest how the modern and postmodern avant-gardes have successively identified what Marinetti calls new dimensions of “tactile sense” and what Stelarc defends as new strategies for perpetuating “life in general, and intelligence in particular.”

Finally, I suggest that increasing hybrid performance artists, such as the American performance artist and director Robert Wilson, the New York “Transgressive” film-maker Nick Zedd, and the French body-artist Orlan, have combined many of the strategies of the historical avant-garde, and of subsequent postmodern “poly” avant-gardes, in predominantly commercial forms of “Techno-Poly-Pop” performance, offering provocative syntheses of experimental and mass-market, popular and “porn-modern” multimedia cultures.

Central Question:

How does technology influence poetry and performance?

Possible Answers:

- a) Technology multiplies poetic and performative “aura.”
- b) Technology destroys poetic and performative “aura.”
- c) Technology trivializes and commercializes performative “aura.”

1. Negative and Positive Theoretical Concepts:

- 1a Walter Benjamin (1936): Technology causes the “loss of aura.”
- 1b Walter Benjamin (1936) Techno-experiments reveal art’s “richest energies.”
- 1c Jean Baudrillard (1987): Technology reduces “metamorphoses” to “metastasis.”
- 1d Jean Baudrillard (1998) Photography rediscovers “aura.”
- 1e Paul Virilio (1995) Technology reduces “animal” bodies to “terminal” bodies.
- 1f Paul Virilio (1996 & 1998) Art reveals ways to “fight” technology.

2. Positive Artistic Concepts

- 2a F. T. Marinetti (1924) New Technologies and “radiophonic sensations.”
- 2b Dick Higgins (1992) New Technologies and the “Spirit” of Chopin’s work.
- 2c Henri Chopin (1967) New Technologies and “audio-poésie.”
- 2d Enzo Minarelli (1987) New Technologies create new “Polypoetry.”
- 2e Stelarc (1994) New Technologies and “cyber-aesthetics.”

3. Techno-hybrids: Techno-Poly-Pop Performance

- 3a Robert Wilson (1980s) “Theatre of Images.”
- 3b Nick Zedd (1980s) “Transgressive Cinema.”
- 3c Orlan (1990s): “Carnal Art.”

1. NEGATIVE AND POSITIVE THEORETICAL CONCEPTS

The writings of Walter Benjamin, Jean Baudrillard and Paul Virilio all typify the way in which cultural theory repeatedly associates new technologies with the loss of various kinds of creative authenticity. Benjamin, for example, associates mechanical reproduction — and cinematic acting in particular — with the loss of performative “aura.”

In much the same way, Baudrillard argues that technology reduces the dynamic energy that he associates with “the body of metamorphoses” to the more symbolic, monodimensional register of “the body of metaphor” and to the still more negative register of “the body of metastasis.” At his most pessimistic, Baudrillard argues that we are all destined to become “metastatic,” and that we must now learn from those whose handicapped bodies already respond to corporeal decline.

In turn, Paul Virilio argues that the increasingly static working conditions of those using computers transforms the “animal body” into the “terminal body,” eliminating distinctions between the technologically healthy body and the technologically “spastic” body.

At the same time, Benjamin also defends the avant-garde's technological aspirations (such as the Berlin dadaist Raoul Hausmann's call for new kinds of technologically modified sound poetry).

Baudrillard's recent writings still more affirmatively argue that photography can rediscover dimensions of "aura." Virilio's recent interviews similarly insist that he too defends technological performance, so long as art "fights" technology and avoids becoming dominated by superficial techno-culture.

Briefly, Benjamin, Baudrillard and Virilio typify the hesitant ambiguity with which academic research approaches the more confident ambiguities of early-, middle- and late-twentieth century techno-creativity.

1a Walter Benjamin: Negative Arguments

"The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction" (1936)

"The film actor... feels...exiled not only from the stage but also from himself. He feels inexplicable emptiness: his body loses its corporeality, it evaporates, it is deprived of reality, life, voice... The projector will play with his shadow before the public, and he himself must be content to play before the camera."

"Aura is tied to his presence; there can be no replica of it."

"The aura which, on stage, emanates from Macbeth, cannot be separated for the spectators from that of the actor. However the singularity of the shot in the studio is that the camera is substituted for the public. Consequently, the aura that envelops the actor vanishes, and with it the aura of the figure he portrays."

1b Walter Benjamin: Positive Arguments

"The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction" (1936)

"One of the foremost tasks of art has always been the creation of a demand which could be fully satisfied only later."

"The history of every art form shows critical epochs in which a certain art form aspires to effects which could be fully obtained only with a changed technical standard, that is to say, in a new art form."

"The extravagances and crudities of art which thus appear, particularly in the so-called decadent epochs, actually arise from the nucleus of its richest energies."

"In recent years, such barbarisms were abundant in dadaism. It is only now that its impulse becomes discernible: dadaism attempted to create by pictorial — and literary — means the effects which the public today seeks in the film." (*figure 1*)

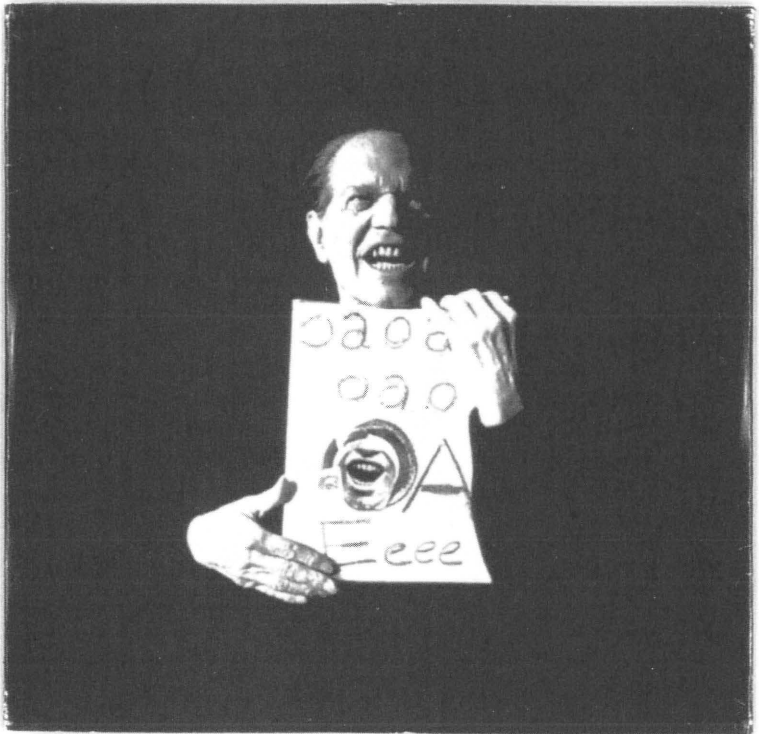


FIGURE 1 Raoul Hausmann Reading Phonetic Poem

1c Jean Baudrillard: Negative Arguments

“Metamorphoses, Metaphors, Metastasis” (1987)

“Mechanical machines ... were still machines with alterity, an other, whereas ... at this point one wonders where the real world is.”

“This kind of artificial world ... completely automatized” brings about “an exclusion of man, of the real world, of all referentiality.”

The “body of metamorphosis” is “a non-individual body without desire, yet capable of all metamorphoses — a body freed from the mirror of itself, yet given over to all seduction.”

The body of metamorphosis “knows neither metaphor nor the operation of meaning” and resists “symbolic order.”

The body of “metamorphosis” deteriorates into the body of “metaphor” whenever “a symbolic order appears” and it becomes “a metaphoric scene of sexual reality.”

The “body of metaphor” no longer offers the poly-valent impact of “a theatre of multiple

initiatory forms,” but only presents “the scene of a single scenario ... the stage of phantasies and the metaphor of the subject.”

“After the bodies of metamorphosis and metaphor follows the body of metastasis.”

The “body of metastasis” brings about a “deprivation of meaning and territory,” where there is “no more soul, no more metaphor of the body.”

In these circumstances our best strategy is to observe and imitate the survival strategies of “the handicapped,” who seem to “precede us on the path towards mutation and dehumanization.”

1d Jean Baudrillard: Positive Arguments

Car l'illusion ne s'oppose pas à la réalité (1998)

“Photography has rediscovered the aura that it lost with cinema.”

Photography generates a “magic and dangerous reality,” according to “a principle of condensation diametrically opposed to the principle of dilution and dispersion characterizing all our images today.”

Photography identifies: “The immobility of an instant in time behind which one always detects a sense of movement, but only a sense of it.”

“This is the kind of immobility that things dream about, this is the kind of immobility that we dream about.”

1e Paul Virilio: Negative Arguments

Open Sky (1995)

“Radiotechnologies ... will shortly turn on their heads not only ... our *territorial body*, but most importantly, the nature of the individual and their *animal body*.”

“The super-equipped able-bodied person” becomes “almost the exact equivalent of the motorized and wired disabled person.”

“Doomed to inertia, the interactive being transfers his natural capacities for movement and displacement to probes and scanners ... to the detriment of his own faculties of apprehension of the real, after the example of the para- or quadriplegic who can guide by remote control — teleguide — his environment, his abode.”

“Having been first *mobile*, then *motorized*, man will become *motile*, deliberately limiting his body's areas of influence to a few gestures.”

“The urbanization of the body of the city dweller” introduces the “catastrophic figure” of the “*citizen-terminal* ... based on the model of the ‘spastic’ wired to control his/her domestic environment without having physically to stir.”

1f Paul Virilio: Positive Arguments

Interview with Nicholas Zurbrugg (1996)

"My research is not at all opposed to technology or technological performance ... Many people claim that I am apocalyptic, negative, pessimistic. But all of that is out of date — it doesn't rise to the heights of the situation!"

Interview with Nicholas Zurbrugg (1998)

"Jacob met his God in the person of an angel and he wrestled with this angel for a whole night and at the end of the night he said to the angel, 'Bless me, because I have fought all night.' What does this symbolize? It means that Jacob did not want to sleep before God. ... He wanted to remain a man before God ... he fought rather than just sleeping as though he was before an idol. Technology places us in the same situation. We have to fight against it rather than sleeping before it."

2. POSITIVE ARTISTIC CONCEPTS

Unlike the writings of cultural theorists such as Benjamin, Baudrillard and Virilio, avant-garde artists such as Marinetti, Chopin, Minarelli and Stelarc enthusiastically defend new kinds of technologically modified creativity. Marinetti's modernist manifestoes, for example, envision new mechanical "fusions" of different media, and explore new poly-possibilities such as Marinetti's experiments with "tactile art" (such as his "tactile table," *Sudan-Paris*) and with new kinds of "radiophonic" creativity. Significantly, whereas Baudrillard and Virilio argue that the healthy body is becoming increasingly indistinguishable from that of the handicapped and the spastic, Marinetti argues that new art forms can "educate the handicapped" and in general increase the artist's "tactile senses."

In turn, postmodern poets such as Chopin and Minarelli discuss the various "new values" and "sonorities" made possible by recording technologies and Australian cybernetic performance artist Stelarc discusses the ways in which new technologies generate still more complex "operational possibilities" provoking "new desires" and "new ways of interfacing with the world." While Marinetti explores the tactile dimensions of the body's surfaces, Chopin and Stelarc discuss their "probing" of the internal body, by swallowing microphones and cameras.

As Higgins observes, the most successful forms of technological performance reveal forceful manifestations of auratic authorial "spirit," and are always more than simply "sonic" performances. Nevertheless, certain general distinctions can be made between different kinds of technological poly-performance. Chopin's work seems above all a mixture of poetic and musical sound, accompanied by physical gesture. Minarelli's work seems to combine musical and theatrical energies, at times integrating a mass cultural rock n'roll sensibility.

Investigating still more open-ended forms of mechanically intensified body art and performance art, integrating sound, movement, dance and robotic technologies, without necessarily prioritizing any "one particular area," Stelarc is one of late twentieth century culture's most fascinating "poly"-artists.

2a Fillipo Tommaso Marinetti

“Destruction of Syntax-Imagination without Strings-Words-in-Freedom Manifesto” (1913)
“Man multiplied by the machine” and “New mechanical sense, a fusion of instinct with the efficiency of motors and conquered forces.”

“Futurist Synthetic Theatre” (1915)

“Electromagnetical inventions ... permit us to realize our most free conceptions on the stage.”

Tactilism Manifesto (1924)

To “educate my tactile sense” and to discover “new ways to educate the handicapped.”

“To wear gloves for several days, during which time the brain will force the condensation into your hands of a desire for different tactile sensations.”

Sudan-Paris: “abstract suggestive tactile table” — the first “tactile art.”

“In its Sudan part this table has spongy material, sandpaper, wool, pig’s bristle and wire bristle. (*Crude, greasy, rough, sharp, burning tactile values, that evoke African visions in the mind of the toucher.*) ... In the Paris part, the table has silk, watered silk, velvet and large and small feather. (*Soft, very delicate, warm and cool at once, artificial, civilized.*)”

“*La Radia Manifesto*” (1933)

“A pure organism of radio sensations.”

“The amplification and transfiguration” of “the vibrations emitted by living beings” and “the vibrations emitted by matter.”

2b Dick Higgins (on Henri Chopin)

“The Golem in the Text” (1992)

“The poet uses complex vocal and non-figurative sounds, edited at several levels — electronically manipulating and broadcasting them at top volume — and adding to them in live performance with voice and microphone.”

“Despite his diminutive height, Henri Chopin radiates such an intensity that he seems to grow to a gigantic scale, the gravity of his expression suggesting some kind of vampire or evil spirit. The process by which this spirit emerges on stage can be really terrifying... Because the real process of the work is non-mimetic, deriving from what the artist — in this case Chopin — is actually doing. In other words, the emergence of this spirit is inherent in the live performance of the work.” (*figure 2*)

2c Henri Chopin

Interview with Nicholas Zurbrugg (1998)

“With the Christian tradition the body was absolutely nothing, but for me the body is of primary importance. Between 1948 and 1949 I studied theology in a seminary, and was furious when people said, “Only, Christ, Christ.” For me it was absolutely impossible, because the human body is very important. Without the body it is impossible to produce the spirit.”



FIGURE 2 Henri Chopin, Pompidou Centre (1980) Photograph: Françoise Janicot.

Interview with Lawrence Kucharz, Larry Wendt and Ellen Zweig (1978)

“I started in '55 with sound ... the diction with my voice was very bad ... but I listened to my voice on a tape recorder ... and my voice is very good ... the timbre is very good too ... so I put my finger between the head and the tape on the tape recorder ... and ... the sound was different! Distortion! After that I changed with my finger the speed of the tape on a very simple tape recorder and again the speed was different.”

Interview with ABC TV (Australian Broadcasting Company) (1992)

“When I put the microphone into the mouth I have simultaneously five sounds: the air and the liquid in the mouth, the respiration in the nose, the air between each tooth and the respiration in the lungs.”

“In 1974 I put into my stomach a very small microphone and it was a discovery — the body is always like a factory! It never stops — there's no silence!”

“Open Letter to Aphonic Musicians” (1967)

“Sound poetry, made for and by the tape-recorder” composed of “vocal micro-particles rather than the Word as we know it,” is “more easily codified by machines and electricity ... than by any means proper to writing.”

Interview with Nicholas Zurbrugg (1992)

“We already have a geometric, computerizable language. But what we still haven't discovered are the ways in which this language will evolve. This is firstly because technology is evolving so rapidly, and secondly, because whereas computers only have forty or so phonemes, we know that we possess thousands of sonic values. We know that the ear not only receives sounds, but also gives out sounds.”

“All these discoveries were completely unknown when I began working with sound poetry — I was starting from very basic literary ideas. It’s thanks to the new technologies that I’ve discovered all these new values.”

“In the same way, future technologies will reveal the multiplicity of our auditory and visual cells — the eye, the ear and all our other senses. So while we cannot predict the future, it’s certain that new departures have already been made and that we cannot live without them.” (figure 3)

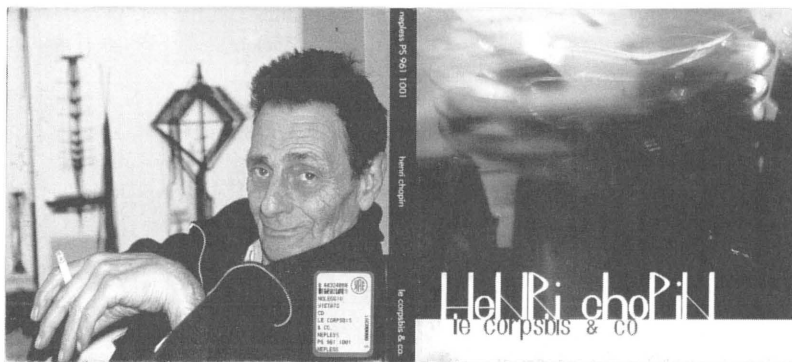


FIGURE 3 Henri Chopin: *Le Corbis & Co*, CD Cover. Nepless Records PS 961 1001, Nepless, Casella Postale 1597, 20123 Milano Corduiso, Italy.

2d Enzo Minarelli

“Manifesto of Polypoetry” (1987)

“Only the development of the new technologies will mark the progress of sound poetry: the electronic media and the computer are and will be true protagonists.”

“Polypoetry is devised and realized for the live show; it gives to sound poetry the role of prima donna or starting point to link relations with musicality (accompaniment or rhythmic line), mimicry, movement and dance (acting or extension or integration of the sound text), image (television or slide projection, picture or installation, by association, explanation or alternative and redundancy), light, space, costumes and objects.” (figure 4)

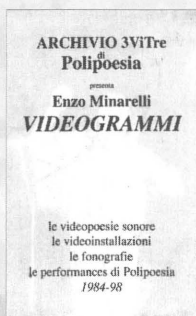


FIGURE 4 Enzo Minarelli, *Videogrammi*, video cover 1998. Archivio 3Vitre di Polipoesia, C.P. 152 44042 Cento, Italy.

Interview with Martin Thomas (1994)

“It was not a matter of me reacting against theatre, but really coming from the visual arts and not being satisfied with traditional modes of expression like painting and sculpture ... Conceptual art had played itself out — so then what were you left with? Nothing but your body.”

“When I went to Japan ... I became increasingly interested in connecting body gesture and posture with sound. The idea of amplifying a muscle signal came to mind. Now, if I make a movement, I twist my arm, flick my fingers, contract muscles and electrodes are stuck on the skin, I can pick up the signal, pre-amplify and process it. Initially the laser beams were reflected off small mirrors stuck on the eyes. Later, they were directed by optic fibre cables... I could scan the space with my laser eyes and, by blinking and moving the muscles of the face, I could actually scribble in space.”

“At the same time that I was doing laser projections with the eyes, I was making internal probes into the stomach, into the colon, into the lungs. I’ve filmed three metres of internal space. The events around 1975 were titled events for internal and external probes ... Piercing the space with laser eyes was a metaphor for probing the body itself.”

Interview with Nicholas Zurbrugg (1995)

“Any form of life, whether it be carbon chemistry or silicon-chip circuitry — any form of life that can perpetuate these values in a more durable or a more pervasive form — should be allowed to develop.”

“There’s no blueprint and there’s no methodical research directed into any one particular area.... These performances aren’t shamanistic displays of human prowess. They’re not pseudo-medical scientific research. They’re not yogic feats of fine-tuning to attain higher spiritual states... They’re simply works of art, exploring intuitively new realms of aesthetics and images.”

“A general strategy of extending performance parameters by plugging the body into cyber-systems, technological systems, networks, machines that in some way enable the body to function more precisely or more powerfully.”

Interview with Nicholas Zurbrugg (1998)

“Can we consider a body that can function with neither memory nor desire?... Is it possible to navigate the world, to operate effectively, sense and communicate, in these kind of cool spaces displaced from the cultural spaces ... of emotion and of personal experience?”

“You become an agent that can extrude awareness and action into another body elsewhere. Your realm of operation goes beyond your biological boundaries and the local space that you function ... the realm of the open, of the divergent rather than the convergent, where what you’re creating are contestable futures, not utopian ideals.”

“Although the Internet data is controlling my body movements, and inadvertently also constructing the choreography of images and the composition of sounds, electrodes on my abdominal and leg muscles are in fact activating my third hand, so although the internet controls me, I control my third hand. And so it’s a kind of split physiology, voltage in on

the left side determining the body's movements, voltage out from the electrodes allowing me to activate my third hand."

"The body acts as a more complex entity with a split physiology, interfaced and engaged in a multiplicity of aesthetic tasks. It structures the performance initially through its hardwiring, and of course, it's aware of what's going on during the performance and it's able to make small adjustments within the flow of activity and images that's occurring."

"New technologies generate information, and generate new models and paradigms that weren't applicable or possible simply by the imagination alone."

"Alternate operational possibilities ... create new desires and new ways of interfacing with the world." (figure 5)



FIGURE 5 5 Stelarc, *Fractal Flesh* CD cover, 1999.
NMA CD 9902, NMA Publications, PO BOX 5034, Burnley 3121, Australia.

3. TECHNO-HYBRIDS: TECHNO-POLY-POP PERFORMANCE

As Chopin suggests in an interview of 1992, technocultural practices permit an art of "synthesis" advancing "towards the future, while at the same time remaining aware of everything that has been written." Younger visionaries like the American video-artist Bill Viola, similarly note how "fascinating relationships between ancient and modern technologies become evident." For Viola, the best new forms of "poly"-art explore "the edge of things, doing something that no one else is doing, putting two ideas together that haven't been put together before."

Since the '80s, many artists working with materials appropriated from popular mass-media culture — such as the American artists Robert Wilson and Nick Zedd and the French body-artist Orlan, have

increasingly employed relatively commercial iconography with some of the concerns explored by the more austere research of artists such as Chopin and Stelarc.

One way or another, Wilson, Zedd and Orlan typify the ways in which recent hybrid multimedia research orchestrating the signs and sounds of the body appear to be at once populist and avant-garde, powerfully auratic and self-consciously trivial, pornographic and prophetic, illuminating and obscene.

Should we celebrate — or should we regret — the ways in which avant-garde artists such as Robert Wilson and Orlan have infiltrated the entertainment industry, in order to undertake expensive projects? Has the avant-garde betrayed its ideals by working with mass-cultural iconography?

Has the avant-garde betrayed its ideals by refining highly ambiguous spectacles? Or is ambiguity also a source of artistic “strengths” as Wilson and Zedd suggest?

And need the avant-garde necessarily follow the paths of transgression and blasphemy, advocated by Zedd and Orlan? Or is the avant-garde a way of rediscovering “the classics,” as Wilson suggests? How “poly” can avant-garde experimentation become, before it ceases to be authentically avant-garde?

Not surprisingly, perhaps, these questions still await answers in the late 1990s.

3a Robert Wilson

Interview with Nicholas Zurbrugg (1991)

“I don’t want to draw any conclusions, and I’d rather process it in time, as something you think about, that’s a continuum. When the curtain goes down, you don’t stop thinking about it. You go home and still think about it. It’s part of an on-going thing, it’s a continuum, it’s something that never, never finishes. Why do we go back to Shakespeare’s *King Lear*? Because we can think about it in multiple ways. It has no one way of thinking about it. It cannot be interpreted.”

“I think that new technologies help us to destroy our codes, to find new languages, and rediscover the classics.”

“I like the fact that William Burroughs is not afraid to destroy the codes in order to make a new language. The language becomes more plastic, more three-dimensional, like molecules that can bounce, combine and are reformed.”

“Essentially that’s what all artists do. One invents a language and then once this language becomes discernible, we destroy it and start again. A series of movements becomes a language, and once that’s discernible, then I change it, and destroy it and add something else.”

3b Nick Zedd

Interview with Nicholas Zurbrugg (1995)

"I always enjoyed Andy Warhol's films, especially the ones with Paul Morrissey. But I felt that the elements could be integrated in a more powerful way, in a more confrontational manner, that they could be more succinct in a different style. I think the music of punk rock and No Wave had some kind of influence — the songs are really short and direct and loud, and that's the way the films ... should be."

"That's the challenge, to always go further ... I think the next step is to go beneath the surface of the bodies, beyond pornography, into internal organs. I met a forensic pathologist in a bar and he said he does autopsies and that I could shoot the corpses ... I think it's arbitrary that only the outside of the body is seen as erogenous. Maybe people will be turned on by internal organs."

"Ambiguity has strengths too. There are different levels of interpretation that occur and it can be thought-provoking for people to try to decipher the meaning. I don't want to have to lower myself to the lowest common denominator and pander to a general audience. I think it's more fascinating when there's a mystery involved."

"There'll always be misinterpretation. And if there wasn't any misinterpretation it would be propaganda, and I'm not going to make propaganda — I am against that."

"I resist putting it into words. I think putting it into words limits it."

3c Orlan

"Conference" (1996)

"I am a multi-media, pluri-disciplinary and interdisciplinary artist. I have always considered my woman's body, my woman-artist's body, privileged material for the construction of my work. My work has always interrogated the status of the feminine body, via social pressures, those of the present or in the past."

"As a plastic artist, I wanted to intervene in the surgical aesthetic, which is cold and stereotyped, and to confront it with others: the decor is transformed, and the surgical team and my team wear clothing conceived by established fashion designers ... Each operation has its own style. This ranges from the carnivalesque ... to high tech, passing through the baroque, etc."

"My work is blasphemous. It is an endeavour to move the bars of the cage, a radical and uncomfortable endeavour!"

"Carnal Art" Manifesto (1998)

"I can observe my own body cut open without suffering ... I can see to the heart of my lover ... Darling, I love your spleen, I love your liver, I adore your pancreas and the line of your femur excites me."

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